

United States Post Office, Customs
House and Sub-Treasury
218 South Dearborn Street
Chicago
Cook County
Illinois

HABS No. ILL-1040

HABS
ILL,
16-CHIG,
89-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE, CUSTOMS HOUSE AND SUB-TREASURY
(Government Building, Federal Building,
Old Post Office, United States Court House)

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Location: 218 South Dearborn Street; occupied the block bounded by South Dearborn, West Adams, South Clark, and West Jackson streets, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.

Present Owner: United States Government.

Present Occupants and Use: Several government agencies; offices and court rooms. Demolished 1965-66.

Statement of Significance: The building was one of the few examples in Chicago of a large public building designed in the Beaux Arts classical style, which became increasingly popular after the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1898-1905.
2. Architect: Henry Ives Cobb; design by a man named Fitzgerald, in Cobb's office /^{III}Information on U. S. Court House, Chicago Illinois, " p. 1/.
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3. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description of the property: Block 121 of School Section Addition of Chicago of Section 16-39-14.

Chain of title: Book 467A, Cook County Recorder's Office: the property was originally owned by Enoch H. Stein, as of his inventory dated 1868 (Document 1). The United States Government acquired the land in two transactions dated March 22, 1872 (Document 10281), and September 29, 1875 (Document 12932); they are its present owners.

4. Builder, suppliers, etc.: Chicago House Wrecking Co. removed the old building; Mc Arthur Bros. laid the new foundations /^{III}Trusten P. Lee, "A History of the U. S. Courthouse in Chicago, " Federal Lawyer (Chicago Chapter of the Federal Bar Association, May, 1963), III, p. 54/.
1

General Sooy Smith was foundation engineer /Frank A. Randall, History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), p. 46/, and George O. Vonerta was supervising engineer of the construction, with A. A. Packard replacing him later / "Information," loc. cit., see also Supplementary Material/.

Neiles, Rich & Co. were the engineers for heating, ventilation, wiring and the hydraulic elevator plant /A Few Examples of the Engineering Work of Neiles, Rich & Co.; Industrial Engineers, Consulting and Designing Engineers (Chicago: 1919), p. 100/.

5. Original plans and construction of the building: It was a heavy monumental structure of eight stories, basement, and dome, supported on 50' wood piles driven to hardpan about 72' below grade at the total cost of 41 cents per cubic foot /Randall, loc. cit./. The original building permit #1041, dated August 31, 1897 is in Book Northwest-Southwest 1894-1897, Department of Buildings, Chicago: "U. S. Government, Post Office foundation, 392' front, 322' deep, 7' high, \$88.40-- amount paid for permit, McArthur Bros., \$208,450--cost."

Early in 1895, Congress appropriated \$4 million for the sale and removal of the existing building, and the erection of a new one. In June, 1896, The Chicago House Wrecking Company received a contract for \$15,519 to purchase and remove the old building. The foundation was begun August, 1897, and finished September, 1898. On August 30, 1898, the contract for the enclosing work on the super-structure was awarded to a New York contractor. The building was dedicated on the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Chicago Fire, October 9, 1899, by President William McKinley. In 1904 the building was ready for occupancy by the Post Office Department; other Federal Agencies moved in 1905 /Lee, loc. cit./.

Murals: The four courtrooms on the sixth floor contain a series of murals depicting great legendary and historical events in the development of law with appropriate quotations. The artist was Van Ingen, who consulted Professor Nathan Abbott of Columbia University on the selection and presentation of the incidents /Ibid., p. 57/. However, according to another source the artist was a Mr. Taylor who worked with the W. P. Nelson Paint Company / "Information," pp. 8-10/.

See Supplementary Material for a more complete description of the building, lists of materials, quantities, and costs; an early description is also included.

6. Alterations and additions: The exterior of the building was cleaned in the summer of 1933 for the Century of Progress Exposition Ibid., p. 7/.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

See Supplementary Material, especially "Information," pp. 4-8.

C. Bibliography:

Gilbert, Paul, and Bryson, Charles Lee. Chicago and Its Makers. Chicago: Felix Mendelsohn, Publisher, 1929.

Randall, Frank A. History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949.

A Few Examples of the Engineering Work of Neiler, Rich & Co.; Industrial Engineers, Consulting and Designing Engineers. Chicago: 1919. Library of the Chicago Historical Society.

Article in Chicago American, May 5, 1958.

Article in Chicago Tribune, February 7, 1960.

"The Chicago Post Office," The Graphic, XII (May 10-17, 1890). Library of the Chicago Historical Society.

"The Chicago Post Office and its Architect H. I. Cobb," Inland Architect, XXXI (April, 1898).

Lee, Trusten P. "A History of the U. S. Courthouse in Chicago," Federal Lawyer (Chicago Chapter of the Federal Bar Association), III (May, 1963), 53-58. Lee is Regional Director, National Archive and Records Service, Region 5, Chicago, Illinois.

"The Post Office Plans," American Architect, LV (January 9, 1897).

"Information on the U. S. Court House, Chicago Illinois." 14 typed pages received July, 1964 from Stanley G. Greene, Regional Director, Public Buildings Service, General Services Administration, 219 South Dearborn, Chicago.

Post Office Bulletin. No. 323, Monday, October 8, 1900.

Dedication Issue. An historical article, description, and rendering of the projected building, filed under: Post Office building; miscellaneous pamphlets in the Library of the Chicago Historical Society.

Scrapbook of clippings relating to the Chicago Post-Office, August 10, 1883-October 1890, presented by William A. Calhoun to the Library of the Chicago Historical Society.

D. Supplementary Material:

The Government Building, Chicago

Early in 1895 Congress passed a bill ordering the erection of a government building in Chicago on the site of the then existing building - the square bounded by Adams, Jackson, Dearborn and Clark streets, and appropriated \$4,000,000 for it. It was approved by President Cleveland February 13, 1895.

The old structure was considered dangerous. Its facilities were far too small, and the government offices, instead of being under one roof, were scattered between many buildings over town. Foremost in the movement was Washington Hising, then postmaster, strongly backed by the unanimous sentiment of the city, and in the final contest for the bill in Congress the Illinois delegation did noble service.

Congress passed a supplemental bill, approved by President Cleveland on January 20, 1896, appropriating \$25,000 for the employment of a special architect. This was the first instance of a building for post-office purposes to be so erected in the country. Early in June, 1896, the contract was awarded to the Chicago House Wrecking Company to remove the old building. Just prior to that time Henry Ives Cobb was appointed architect by Secretary Carlisle, and actual work upon the plans of the building were begun.

The basement, first and second stories cover the entire lot, a rectangle 321 by 396 feet, and are devoted exclusively to post-office purposes, excepting the space necessary for entrances.

As may be seen from the framework now in place, the third to the eighth story form a Greek cross, whose arms extend to the four streets, leaving hollow corners. This space, added to the width of the adjoining streets, insures perfect light and ventilation, and adds conspicuously to the grandeur of the building, and permits a view of its imposing dome,

to be of burnished gilt, 300 feet high, and by this method of construction no inner courts are necessary. Besides its monumental value this dome will embrace six full stories of offices and rooms above the top of the main building. The railway mail service, the weather bureau, and the civil service will be quartered there. The dome itself will be a great building, being one hundred feet in diameter and sixteen stories high.

In the main part will be the collector of customs, the sub-treasury and internal revenue, the engineers and other offices of the war department, and also officers of the various other departments of the government. For the first time since Chicago became a city, the representatives of the general government will all be quartered under one roof. The sixth, seventh and eighth stories of the main wing will be almost exclusively occupied by the judges and their courts, marshals, etc.

To the ninth story the dome is open internally. It will be decorated in fine marble, bronzes, and paintings. Each of the surrounding galleries of every story will open into the elevators and the main stairs from which a view in every direction may be had of the corridor. In other words, there will be no corners to turn. As one steps off the elevator, every office on that floor is in plain sight.

The foundation was begun by McArthur Bros. in August, 1897, finished in September, 1898, and cost \$208,000, and was completed without one cent of extra. The highest bid for the work was \$397,000.

Fifteen bids were opened April 4, 1898, for the enclosing work of the super structure, ranging from \$2,899,000 to \$1,897,000. The contract was let at the latter figure, April 30, 1898, to John Pierce, the New York contractor. In this contract is included all that will enclose the building and make it ready for partitions, plastering and decorations--500,000 cubic feet of gray granite from Mount Waldo, Maine; 19,000,000 pounds of steel, of which that portion now to be seen constitutes barely one-quarter, fire-proof floor-arches, roofing, the ornamental metal work, and so on through all the items which go to make up the exterior. After this contract is completed, there will be left nearly \$2,000,000 to be expended on the interior, a sum, the architect thinks, ample to equip thoroughly and decorate the offices, covering an area of over 600,000 square feet. /Post Office Bulletin, No. 323./

The name of the present structure on this site is the UNITED STATES COURT HOUSE, as designated by the Treasury

Department March 17, 1933. It is located at 225 South Clark Street, Chicago 4, Illinois. This building occupies one square block; bounded on the east by Dearborn Street, on the south by Jackson Boulevard, on the west by Clark Street, and on the north by Adams Street.

This is the second such building housing Government activities on this site. The first building was constructed during the year 1879 and the present structure was commenced during the year of 1898. The old building was closed and was razed beginning with the year 1896. From the time razing procedures were started until the new building was ready for occupation, the Post Office Department operated from a temporary building, which they moved into in June, 1897. It was a low shanty type building at the foot of Michigan Avenue and the River on the southeast side, on the present site of the 333 Building. The ground needed for this temporary building was donated by the City of Chicago with the express understanding that the Government would pay all costs for the clearing of the ground after they were through with the building. For this, the Government allocated \$200,000, which was later supplemented by \$35,000.

The time for construction of the present building took seven years. This was due, mainly, to the policy then in force of appropriating just sufficient funds to accomplish each and every contract as it was let. There was no general Contractor for the building. Over 100 separate contracts were let. The design of the building is an original one and the plans were drawn by a Mr. Fitzgerald who operated from the Office of the Architect, Henry Ives Cobb, Chicago, Illinois. It is of Roman Corinthian style for the most part. The building is fireproof, of steel construction and the foundations are of limestone masonry supported on oak piles and grillage. The total height of the building is 297 feet from the sidewalk, and the depth of the foundation is 76 feet. The approximate weight of the building is 120,000 tons. The cubical content is 12,000,000 cubic feet. The exterior walls are of gray granite, with brick backing, the roofs are of book tile covered with vitrified tile. The dome is roofed with gilt glass tiles and the floor arches and partitions are terra cotta. The interior finish is that of a first class office building. The treatment of the first floor corridor, dome staircases and courtrooms is very elaborate. The materials of the interior consist of oak, mahogany, native and foreign marbles, scagliola and bronzed iron. The main part of the building is eight stories in height, and the dome contains eight more stories. The measurement of the building overall is 311' x 386'. There is also a full basement, with utilization of the area under

the sidewalk for storage rooms and an outlet from the boiler room to the Chicago Underground Tunnel.

George O. Vonerta was the Supervising Engineer of the construction and was later replaced by Mr. A. A. Packard, as Supervising Engineer. Mr. Packard furnished the majority of this data from his records. He retired from Active Service in 1947.

The marble used in the construction of the building is from Maine, Tennessee, and Vermont. The foreign marble is from Italy. Center of the building support structures are Italian. The total known cost of the building, which was in excess of six million dollars, is above the estimate by the Supervising Engineer at that time.

The correct name of the building at the time of dedication was "Post Office, Customs House and Sub Treasury". The building was dedicated by President McKinley (1897-1901) and was one of his last official acts before being assassinated.

The first known Postal Activity for the Chicago area was during the year of 1831, when the mail was delivered by the Postmaster himself, at the old Kinzie House, located at the foot of Pine Street, and which was on the north side of the Chicago River, near the Wabash Avenue bridge. During the year of 1832, all of the business for the Government was conducted in a log cabin, 29 by 45 feet, situated on South Water Street (now Wacker Drive) near the southwest corner of Franklin Street. In the year 1836 the Post Office Activities were removed from Franklin and South Water Street to 7 Clark Street. The total volume of business was in the amount of \$2,148.29. There is no record of expenditures for this time. The City of Chicago received a City Charter in 1837, and the City became a distributing Post Office. A daily mail to the East was established at this time.

In 1838 the Post Office Department expanded and was required to move to 37 Clark Street at the southeast corner of Lake Street. During the year of 1844 the Post Office Department handled forty-four weekly mails, both incoming and outgoing from Chicago. The Office was again moved to 80 Clark Street, between Lake Street and Randolph Street. In 1846 the Postal receipts had grown to \$7,226.52 and the expenses amounted to \$5,234.00 for the year. In 1850 the Postal receipts were \$14,630 and the expenses were \$11,863. The total population at this time was 28,269. During 1853 the Post Office was again moved, this time to larger quarters situated at 51-53 Clark Street, on the present site of the Ashland Block, at the northeast corner of Clark and Randolph Street.

During the year 1854 Postmaster Isaac Cook complained to the Postmaster General in Washington that the influx of people into Chicago hampered his work and that he did not have sufficient help nor space to operate properly and to cope with the demands on the Post Office. The Registry System of handling valuable mail was started on March 3, 1854. In 1863 the free delivery system of mail matter was established. In 1864 the Money Order System was established. In 1865 the Railway Mail Service was started by George Buchanan Armstrong, a clerk in the Postal Service. During the year 1855 the Post Office Department had been moved to 84-86 Dearborn Street, at the corner of Court Place. During the year of 1860 the first Government building was started on the present site of the First National Bank Building, northeast corner of Clark and Monroe Streets. This building burned to the ground during the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Immediately after the fire subsided, Post Office facilities were available and mail was moved through a temporary building located in Burlington Hall at 16th and State Streets. After three weeks there, it was necessary to move again, to the Methodist Church at Wabash Avenue and Harrison Street.

On July 14, 1874 the Post Office was again destroyed by fire. The mail headquarters were then re-established at West Division Station, Halsted and Washington Streets. Later in the same year, on August 23rd, the Office was moved to the Honore Building, (the present Marquette Building) at the northwest corner of Adams and Dearborn Streets. During the year of 1879, On January 4th, the Post Office Department had another fire. It was then moved to the Singer Building at State and Washington Streets. On April 12, 1879 the Post Office Department moved into the Government Building on the block bounded by Adams, Clark, Jackson and Dearborn streets. This building was the first of the two Government Buildings on this site.

During the year of 1893, at the time of the first Chicago World's Fair, the Post Office Department consisted of 935 carriers and 998 clerks. In 1894 Congress voted an appropriation of \$4,990,000 for the erection of a new Government building on this site. At this time the Postal force consisted of 1,319 clerks and 1,096 carriers.

In 1896 Congress appropriated \$20,000 for the erection of an annex to the temporary quarters of the Post Office Department at the River and Michigan Avenue. This amount was later increased to \$35,000.

On October 9, 1899, Chicago Day, commemorating the date of the Chicago Fire of 1871, this building was dedicated by President McKinley.

Work on the annex to the temporary quarters on the River was started on July 9, 1900, and completed in ninety days.

In 1904 the Post Office Department moved into the present building. In 1905 the other Government activities moved into the building. The building was opened to the public that same year.

On February 4, 1940 there appeared in the color section of the Chicago Tribune a picture of the U. S. Customs and Post Office Building which was on this site. This building consisted of five stories high and a loft above. The style of the architecture is the same as that of the U. S. Department of State Building in Washington, D. C. There is a hidden image, a replica of the great stone face of Uncle Sam, visible at a certain time in the afternoon, standing on the northwest corner of Adams and Dearborn Streets, looking at the dome - when the sun is shining, the shadows and the outline of the dome structure produces this image.

This Building was bombed during the year of 1920 when the Adams Street entrance doors were blown out, injuring many people both in and out of the building and killing at least one mail carrier outright and severely injuring one girl. This bomb was thrown or set by the I.W.W., a radical organization of that time. This bomb was set behind a radiator on Adams Street. All of the windows on the Adams Street side were blown out, including those in the buildings in this area. Another attempt was made to bomb this Building on October 31, 1921, but the bomb was located before the time the fuse burned down. There was no damage to the Building or its people.

This Building was operated by the Treasury Department until 1933 when the Post Office Department assumed management and operation.

On the sixth floor of the building, in the Courtrooms, there are some of the finest murals in the United States. During the year of 1904-05, there was a general contract let, for the paintings of these murals, and the decorating of the four courtrooms. The artist who did these murals was a Mr. Taylor, who lived somewhere in the east, and who worked in conjunction with the W. P. Nelson Paint Company (later the National Decorating Company). "Information on the U. S. Court House, Chicago Illinois."

Sources of foregoing information:

The Treasury Department Registers
Postal Bulletin No. 323, dated October 8, 1900

Mr. A. A. Packard, Supervising Engineer, F. W. A.
Miss Springer, Marshal's Office, U. S. Court House
Mr. Edward Mack, Marshal's Office, U. S. Court House
Miss Hope Hamilton, Office of the Collector of Internal Revenue
Mr. Roy H. Johnson, Clerk U. S. District Court
Mr. Gordon Morgan, Chief Clerk, U. S. Attorney's Office
Mr. Charles Macko, Chicago Public Library, Civic Branch
And file correspondence.

Prepared by Larry J. Homolka,
Historian and
J. William Rudd,
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
July 1964

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Perhaps the finest example of Beaux Art Classicism in downtown Chicago.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 361' 0" x 321' 0", square.
2. Number of stories: The main block of the building is two stories with a raised basement; a higher element, forming a Greek cross in plan, is eight stories high. A dome rises above the eighth floor at the crossing.
3. Number of bays: The center portion which forms the end of the Greek cross on each facade is three bays wide. This is flanked by eight bays on each side at the two story level.
4. Foundations: Granite foundation walls are supported on 55' piles which go to hardpan.
5. Wall construction: Dark grey granite ashlar.
6. Structural system, framing: The building has a structural steel frame which is surrounded by the granite.
7. Porches, stoops: There are four major entrances, one

at the center of each side. The south entrance is the employees' entrance, the other three are public entrances.

8. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Each entrance has two revolving doors, flanked by double swinging doors, each side. Frames are wooden, painted grey on the exterior with egg and dart motif at heads above transoms. A second set of security doors is outside of both swinging doors and revolving doors. These doors are wooden with four square, vertical panels per door.
- b. Windows: Most of them are double-hung, multi-light windows.

9. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Flat, built-up.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Stone cornice and balustrade at second floor of square base. Stone raking cornice and eaves occur at the eighth floor of portion defining the Greek cross. Stone cornice at spring line of dome over Rotunda.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: Eight-sided dome over Rotunda.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Used for storage, parking, and mail deliveries to the building.
- b. First floor: The axes of the building forming the Greek cross are circulation spaces to the Rotunda, located at the crossing and rising the full height of the building. The remainder of the first floor (the four quadrants) is office and post office space. The Rotunda is octagonal. The first two stories are treated as one, through articulation of the arch. Floors two, four and six have continuous marble string courses, and single-story paired columns with Corinthian capitals. The railings of the circulation space (at each of these floors and adjacent to the Rotunda space) are wrought-iron. Floors three and five are similar, except railings

are marble. The springing of the inner dome occurs at the seventh floor and has three bull's-eye openings into the Rotunda. The eighth floor has a single bull's-eye opening into the Rotunda at the northwest, southwest, northeast and southeast sides. The inner dome has an opening into the space above and under the outer dome.

- c. Upper floors: These floors are composed of various combinations of offices and courtrooms.
2. Stairways: Stairways are located in the northwest and southeast corners off of Rotunda. They have white marble treads and risers. The stairwells are triangular in plan. The hand rail has an oak grasp; the railing is heavy, but simply detailed wrought-iron. Elevators are located in the southwest and northeast corners off of the Rotunda.
 3. Flooring: The flooring is generally linoleum in the offices with some carpeting. In circulation areas, marble is generally used with a mosaic tile design being worked into the marble of the Rotunda floor.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster.
 5. Doorways and doors: The oak doors and frames are generally half glass with two horizontal wooden panels below, and transoms over.
 6. Decorative features and trim: Marble wainscot throughout. Many ceilings have continuous egg and dart motif under a band of small denticulated ornament. The original elevator grills are simple, black, wrought-iron cage construction.
 7. Notable hardware: On the doors, the hardware is simple brass, with "U-S" on the handles. There are floral designs at the top and bottom of large smooth, brass escutcheon plates.
 8. Lighting: Electrical lighting; the fixtures in the Rotunda area are large white globes.
 9. Heating: Central heating.
- D. Site:

The building occupied the entire block bounded by Dearborn, Adams, Clark and Jackson Streets, in the heart of the loop area. A set of original prints of the building was located

in the office of the building manager before the building
was demolished 1965-66.

Prepared by J. William Rudd
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
July 1964

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The records of this structure were made during the 1964 Chicago II Project. This was the second in a series of summer projects designed to record the significant architecture of the Chicago area. The project was sponsored by Mr. Earl A. Reed, FAIA. He was assisted by a Finance committee composed of John Fugard, FAIA; William E. Hartmann, FAIA; Alfred Shaw, FAIA; and a Selection committee consisting of James Arkin, AIA; Ruth Schoneman, Art Institute of Chicago; and J. Carson Webster, Northwestern University. Organizations cooperating with HABS in this project were the City of Chicago; the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, its Foundation, the Garrick Salvage Fund; and the Women's Architectural League of Chicago. The City of Chicago provided office space, and the Illinois Institute of Technology furnished living quarters.

Mr. James C. Massey, HABS Supervisory Architect, was in over-all charge of HABS summer programs. Professor J. William Rudd, then of Texas Technological College, served as Chicago II Project Supervisor. Other members of the summer team were historian, Larry Homolka, Harvard University; photographer, Harold Allen; secretary, Mrs. Bert P. Schloss; and student architects, Joseph Hayman, University of Pennsylvania; Robert Felin, University of Pennsylvania; Robert Saxon, Pennsylvania State University; Rex Poggenpohl, Illinois Institute of Technology; and Janis Erins, Illinois Institute of Technology.